Promoting Equity in Children's Literacy Instruction

Using a Critical Race Theory Framework to Examine Transitional Books

Sandra Hughes-Hassell, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Heather A. Barkley, MLS, School Library Media Coordinator, Dixon Road Elementary School, Willow Spring, North Carolina.

Elizabeth Koehler, Master's Student, School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The purpose of this study was to examine books that support transitional readers to determine the representation of people of color. The findings were analyzed using critical race theory (CRT), a theoretical framework that places race at the center of educational research and discourse. The results indicate that despite the increasing ethnic and racial diversity in the United States, children of color are rare in transitional books. Even rarer are authors of color. The authors conclude that this lack of representation of people of color in transitional books is a subtle form of racism that denies children of color the kinds of resources research suggests they need to become motivated, engaged, and proficient readers. In the tradition of CRT, the article closes by offering nine strategies school librarians can employ to promote equity in literacy instruction for children of color.

"Who says black boys won't read?"—*Sharon Flack, 2007*

Introduction

Reading scores among African American, Hispanic, and American Indian fourth graders significantly lag behind those of White and Asian American children. According to the most recent U.S. Department of Education data, 54 percent of African American, 50 percent of Hispanic, and 51 percent of American Indian fourth grade students scored below basic in reading as compared to 22 percent of whites and 23 percent of Asian Americans (NAEP 2007). Closing these gaps is a focus of national discourse.

A related concern is the decline in reading for pleasure that occurs between the ages of eight and eleven. McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) found that attitudes toward reading both as a pastime and as a school related activity decreases significantly as students move through first to sixth grade. A more recent study conducted by Scholastic (2008) found that this trend still holds true. In this study, 82 percent of children between the ages of five and eight said they love reading or like it a lot; however, the percentage dropped to 61 percent between the ages of nine and eleven. The study also found that daily reading declines after age eight. Thirty percent of the five to eight year olds surveyed were identified as frequent readers, compared with only 22 percent of nine to eleven year olds. This decline in reading for pleasure coincides with the period when children are either in the process of transitioning from picture books and easy readers to more complex chapter books or are already expected to have made that leap.

Studies have demonstrated that both reading achievement and reading motivation are affected by the availability of literature that offers children "personal stories, a view of their cultural surroundings, and insight on themselves" (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001, 810). For children of color this means multicultural literature. With repeated exposure to engaging literature in which children of color find characters and a context that they can recognize and to which they can relate, reading is more likely be an appealing and successful activity (Bell and Clark 1998; Gangi 2008; Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001). But is that literature readily available, especially at this critical transitional time in their reading development? And if so, what individual groups of color are represented and to what extent? To answer these questions, we conducted a content analysis of transitional books—books recommended to support readers as they move from easy readers to more complex chapter books. This article discusses the issues underlying the research and presents the method and results of our analysis.

Review of the Literature

America's School Children

In 2007, 43.5 percent of the students attending K–12 schools in the United States were of color (School Data Direct 2008). Specifically, 16.1 percent were African American, 21.1 percent were Hispanic, 4.6 percent were Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 1.2 percent was American Indian/Native Alaskans. Five percent of these students were English language learners. The diversity of America's schools is predicted to grow over the next two decades. Census figures show that the number of Hispanic and Asian American children younger than five has grown by double-digit percentages since 2000. The number of African American children has also grown, although more slowly (Cohn and Bahrampour 2006). In 2005, there were 15.7 million children in immigrant families residing in the United States (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2007). These included children born both outside inside the United States to at least one foreign-born parent. It is predicted that by 2050, 36 million children in the United States will be descendants of immigrants who arrived after 2005 (Passel and Cohn 2008). Many of these children will be of color.

Books for Transitional Readers

There is little consensus about what to call books that support transitional readers—readers who are making the transition from early readers to independent, self-regulating readers (Szymusiak, Sibberson, and Koch 2008). Various labels have been used, including "early chapter books," "first chapter books," and "transitional books." Publishing companies have added to the confusion by developing their own labels for these books, such as Stepping Stones by Random House or Green Light Readers by Harcourt. Regardless of what these books are called, researchers agree that they are necessary to the reading success of children. As Lempke (2008) notes, "For some children, one day they are struggling word by painful word through *Frog and Toad*—when all of a sudden they can sail through *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It's like a switch being flipped. For most children, however, the leap from easy readers to chapter books is daunting" (34). For children in the United States, this transition typically occurs around the second or third grade.

Taberski (2000) describes transitional readers as children who

- can recognize many words, even those considered to be difficult or content related;
- integrate meaning, syntax, and phonics consistently;
- have a variety of ways to figure out unfamiliar words;
- can generally read independent-level text with fluency, expression, and proper phrasing;
- are beginning to handle longer, more complex text with short chapters and more interesting characters;
- can summarize texts they've read; and
- are growing more aware of story and text structures.

Transitional readers need books that provide text supports that will enable them to become more independent in their reading. The level of text support varies from book to book, but often includes

- short chapters that can be read in one sitting;
- short paragraphs with sentences that are usually short and lines that break at the end of a sentence;
- more challenging and unusual vocabulary;
- illustrations that enhance the text and provide a sense of familiarity to the reader; and
- a table of contents that lists the individual chapter titles (Szymusiak, Sibberson, and Koch 2008; Taberski 2000).

Many transitional books are series books whose characters, style, and likely story progression is familiar. These books support students' development as readers in the same way as the repetitive language and structure of emergent and early readers supported them when they were first learning to read (Taberski 2000).

The Role of Multicultural Literature in Reading Motivation and Achievement

Motivation is a key determinant of reading success (Eccles and Wigfield 1995; Guthrie and Alao 1997; Oldfather and Wigfield 1997). Research suggests that children tend to prefer and are more likely to engage with literature that reflects their personal experiences (Cianciolo 1989; DeLeón 2002; Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001; Jose and Brewer 1984; McCollin and O'Shea 2005; Purves and Beach 1972). Conversely, a continuous disconnect between children's real-life experiences and backgrounds may cause them not only to find reading frustrating (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001), but to eventually become disengaged from literacy activities altogether (Ferdman 1990). As Flake (2007) argues, youth of color, especially black males, are unlikely to read if they are not given stories about people who look like them and behave as they do:

> Black boys will read. But to get them off to a flying start, we've got to give them books that remind them of home—who they are. When this happens, they fly through books—even the most challenged readers. They hunger for the work like a homeless man finally getting a meal that's weeks overdue. (Flake 2007, 14)

In other words, when children of color encounter characters that look like them and whose stories mirror their own experiences and culture, they are more likely to see how reading can play a role in their lives and to develop a love of reading (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001).

Reading multicultural literature is not just connected to reading motivation. It is also directly related to reading achievement. As Gangi (2008) asserts, "children must be able to make connections with *what* they read to become proficient readers" (30, emphasis ours). Indeed, a number of researchers have shown that reading culturally relevant texts is crucial to student performance. McCullough (2008) explains that "when readers interact with literature that relates to their culture-specific experiences, their reading comprehension performance will improve" (7).

Reynolds and his colleagues (1982) investigated the link between cultural schemata and reading comprehension. African American and white eighth-grade students read a fictitious letter that described an instance of "sounding" or "playing the dozens," a form of verbal ritual insult predominantly found in the African American community. African American students interpreted the passage as verbal play, whereas the white students tended to interpret it as a description of a fight. The researchers concluded that students' cultural backgrounds affected how the material was interpreted or comprehended. They argued that some of the reading problems minority children exhibit may be attributable to mismatches between their subculture and the majority cultural values represented in the textbooks and other reading materials schools use to teach and test reading comprehension.

Similarly, Bell and Clarke (1998) examined the effects of racial imagery and cultural themes in reading content on comprehension and recall with more than one hundred African American children in grades one through four. After listening to a story and viewing the accompanying illustrated story manuscript, the students were asked a series of questions designed to assess their recall and comprehension. The researchers found that the African American students' reading comprehension and recall were more efficient and accurate when the text and illustrations of the reading materials reflected themes consistent with their own sociocultural experiences than when they depicted white imagery and culturally distant themes. Comprehension for the older males was more affected by the type of racial imagery depicted in the stories, whereas it was the themes of the stories that seemed to affect the female students' comprehension more. Like Reynolds et al., Bell and Clarke concluded that a key factor in bridging the reading gap between children of color and white children is to consider cultural factors in the production and selection of reading materials.

Studies conducted by McCullough (2008) and Conrad et al. (2004) provide additional support for the use of culturally relevant reading materials with students of color to assess and teach reading skills. McCullough explored the relationship between the cultural orientation of literature and reading comprehension to determine its effect on low-, mid-, and high-level readers. More than one hundred African American eighth graders in four schools read six short stories representing African American, Asian, and European American cultural orientations from young adult multicultural anthologies and completed demographic, prior-knowledge, and reading-comprehension instructions. Two stories representing each of the cultures were selected. The researcher found that the level of cultural knowledge influenced students' comprehension despite the students' placement on the reading achievement spectrum. That is, the students with low reading levels but high levels of cultural knowledge scored higher on comprehension tests than students with higher reading levels but low cultural knowledge. McCullough concluded that cultural knowledge is a significant tool that mediates the comprehension process for African American students. She argued that combining the use of culturally relevant texts with instructional strategies that focus on building on prior knowledge can support teachers in their goal of promoting high achievement for all students.

Conrad et al. (2004) tested the efficacy of combining culturally responsive teaching, including the use of culturally relevant text, with Text Talk, a technique used with young children during read-alouds to foster oral language and comprehension. The researchers found that combining the two strategies improved the comprehension and oral-language skills of all of the second-grade students who participated in their study, thus providing "a gateway to successful reading for students who were finding learning to read challenging" (189). They concluded that when adults take into consideration children's knowledge, interests, conceptions, and culture during storybook read-alouds, they are able to more effectively promote learning.

In their work with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, McCollin and O'Shea (2005) found that using culturally and linguistically relevant reading material not only fostered reading comprehension, but also helped address

phonological awareness gaps and contributed to improved fluency. They argue that using materials that hold meaning to the students is essential to supporting their reading-acquisition skills and strengthening their reading motivation.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a multidisciplinary epistemology developed by legal scholars in the 1970s to address the effects of race and racism in the U.S. legal system (for an extensive review of the origins and development of CRT in legal studies, see Tate 1997). CRT "decenters the prominent position of class and socioeconomic status found in critical legal studies and repositions race as the primary lens for exploring legislation and its political enactments" (Chapman 2007, 157). A key goal of CRT is to bring about change that will lead to social justice (DeCuir and Dixson 2004).

CRT has been applied within the context of education to examine the role race plays in a number of areas, including curriculum (Ladson-Billings 1998), school funding (Alemán 2007), and school discipline policies (Dixson 2006). Recently, as we will discuss below, CRT has been used to examine children's literature.

A basic premise of CRT is the permanence of race. According to McNair (2008a), racism is "embedded into the fabric of our everyday lives and often appears natural, instead of abnormal, to most Americans" (7). As such, CRT scholars argue that racism has played and continues to play a dominant role in determining inequity in the United States. They call for the examination and monitoring of political, economic, and social institutions to ensure that those institutions do not continue to privilege whites and thus lead to the "subsequent Othering of people of color in all areas, including education" (DeCuir and Dixson 2004, 27).

Another essential element of CRT is counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling is defined as "a method of telling a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 144). According to Matsuda (1995), "Those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen" (63). They offer a perspective that will "help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world" (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 41). CRT scholars believe that by giving voice to the marginalized, counterstories validate their life circumstances and serve as powerful ways to challenge and subvert the versions of reality held by the privileged.

The notion of whiteness as property is a third feature of CRT. According to CRT scholars, U.S. society is based on property rights (Harris 1995). Simply put, those with more and "better" property are entitled to more and "better" services and benefits. If whiteness is seen as property, then the mere fact of being born white in America carries certain privileges. For example, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) point out, access to a high-quality, rigorous curriculum has been almost exclusively enjoyed by white students. They argue that tracking, honors, and gifted programs, as well as advanced-placement courses, have served to essentially resegregate schools.

Interest convergence theory, a fourth tenet of CRT, maintains that people of color will not achieve racial advances unless those advances intersect with the economic interests of whites (Bell 1992). Bell and Clark (1998) argue, for example, that many of the civil rights gains within communities of color have occurred because they converge with the self-interests of whites and do not require major disruptions to the "normal" way of life for the majority of whites. They offer the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as an example. According to Bell, the *Brown* decision made very little substantive difference in the lives of most whites. However, it led to the closing of schools in black neighborhoods, the dismissal of many African American teachers and administrators, the implementation of practices such as tracking, and the placement of a disproportionate number of African American students in special education classes, all of which make the social gains from *Brown* questionable.

Using CRT to Examine Children's Literature

McNair (2008b; 2008c) examined Firefly (preschool) and Seesaw (K–1) Scholastic Book Club order forms for a period of one year to determine which authors and illustrators of children's literature—particularly those of color—were routinely included or excluded. Her analysis revealed that the names of authors and illustrators of color appeared thirty-four times, while the names of white authors and illustrators appeared more than six hundred times. The results indicated that there is a selective tradition operating within the context of Firefly and Seesaw book clubs that excludes the voices and viewpoints of people of color. McNair concluded that while most users might perceive Scholastic Book Club order forms to be politically or socially "neutral," they are not. Instead, a subtle racism is present within the context of the forms.

Gangi (2008) used CRT to examine literacy textbooks and professional books—along with booklists, awards, school book fairs, and children's literature textbooks—for multicultural content and authors. From her analysis, Gangi concluded that there is an "unbearable whiteness" in literacy instruction in the United States. That is, most of the tools that teachers use for literacy instruction and to guide children's recreational reading choices advantage white children and marginalize children of color.

CRT has also been applied to literary analysis. Franzak (2003) explored two young adult novels, *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper 1994) and *Whirligig* (Fleischman 1998), through the lens of CRT. She argues that by reading the novels through this lens, the racial meanings of the text become central to the readers' interpretation and understanding. She concludes that paired together, the books "afford a powerful opportunity for students to explore racial identity and concepts of justice, healing, and hope" (53).

McNair (2008a) conducted a comparative analysis of two sets of African American children's literature: *The Brownies' Book*, a periodical directed primarily at black children that was created by W. E. B. Du Bois in the 1920s, and contemporary African American children's literature written by Patricia McKissack. McNair found that both bodies of work share two underlying assumptions. First, Du Bois and McKissack realize, as do critical race theorists, that "racism is very much a part of American society, and that

children should be prepared to encounter it in their lives" (McNair 2008a, 19). DuBois and McKissack aim to use literature as a form of social protest against racism and to prepare children to resist and challenge racism in their own lives. A second underlying assumption in their work centers on the belief that all children deserve to see themselves reflected in literature. McNair found that both bodies of work not only present accurate and positive representations of the culture, experiences, and history of African Americans, but both consistently challenge dominant perspectives through storytelling. McNair concluded that literature by and about African Americans has the potential to "counter the racism and negative stereotypes of African Americans that are so prevalent in mainstream American society" (21). It also has the ability to raise students' social consciousness and engage them in discussions about racism. Finally, McNair demonstrated that CRT is not only a valuable tool for studying children's literature, but can also be used to help teacher educators understand that as social and cultural constructs, children's literature is not free of cultural phenomena such as racism.

Most recently, Brooks (2009) applied CRT to the 2002 Coretta Scott King Award book by Mildred Taylor, *The Land.* Specifically, she used CRT as an interpretive tool for examining the way Taylor embeds meanings of land ownership into the novel. Brooks concluded that the novel authenticates the lives of many African Americans and provides a great deal of insight regarding issues of race and racism in the past and present. From a theoretical perspective, she reinforced the value of CRT as a tool for literary analysis.

The Current Study

The following research questions guided our study:

- What percentage of the books recommended for transitional readers features people of color?
- What individual groups of color are represented and to what extent?
- What race or ethnicity are the authors of these books?

To compile the sample of transitional books used for this study, we used the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List database. The database, which contains more than 32,000 leveled books, supports an integrated approach to literacy instruction. The books range from level A, which is easy for very young children to begin to read, to level R, which is intended to support fluent readers. Fountas and Pinnell's list of titles is used in many schools across the country as the basis for literacy instruction and the development of classroom book collections, as well as to supplement school library collections.

Fountas and Pinnell consider the books in levels J through M to be books for transitional readers. Level J books are characterized as having easy-to-understand narratives, short chapters, unchanging but well-presented characters, assigned dialogue, and easy-to-read formats with large fonts, spaces between words and lines, and sentences that begin on the left side of the page (Fountas and Pinnell 2006). Level J books also include meaningful illustrations on most pages to provide context clues. The books become gradually more complex up to level M. Level M books are characterized as having fewer illustrations,

longer chapters, smaller print, narrower word spacing, and more complex vocabulary (Ibid.).

We chose content analysis as our method. All of the books leveled J through M in the database were copied to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Picture books, nonfiction titles excluding biographies, and nontrade books published specifically for reading instruction by publishers such as Rigby, Mondo, and Wright Group were removed from the list. The final sample contained 556 titles. For each book we recorded the following information:

- bibliographic information (title, author, illustrator, publisher, copyright date)
- level of the book (J, K, L, M)
- race or ethnicity of the main and major secondary characters
- race or ethnicity of authors and illustrators

We determined the race or ethnicity of main and major secondary characters of each title by using information provided by the cover illustrations, plot summaries, subject headings, book reviews, and the available online content of the books. Nonhuman main or secondary characters such as animals, robots, monsters, and so forth were counted as "other." If the race or ethnicity of the main or major secondary characters was undeterminable, we marked it as "unknown." Figure 1 provides a coding example. We acquired the necessary information via NoveList K–8, Amazon, Google Books, Google Images, and publishers' webpages.

The race or ethnicity of the author for each title was determined using *Something About the Author* (Gale), NoveList K–8, publisher's webpages, and author's personal webpages. If an author's race or ethnicity could not be determined, it was marked as "unknown."

We recognize that this study is not without limitations. Our determination of the race or ethnicity of the main and major secondary characters was often dependent on illustrations. As Bishop (1997) notes, there is great diversity among various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Visually portraying the race, ethnicity, and cultural authenticity of characters "may involve tacit knowledge of which the artist might be unaware" (Ibid., 9). We believe the same is true for judging the race, ethnicity, and cultural authenticity of characters portrayed in an illustration. Even identifying the race or ethnicity of a person from a photograph or illustration can prove difficult for individuals who have not been acculturated to the group being portrayed. This is especially true for transitional books, which often feature black-and-white line drawings.

Second, the Fountas and Pinnell database does not contain all the transitional titles published, as Books in Print, for example, would. However, as we stated earlier, there is no single term used for transitional books, making it difficult to compile a sample from a resource like Books in Print.

Findings

Racial and Ethnic Representation of the People Depicted

Using Holsti's (1969) formula, we calculated inter-coder reliability for the three coders to be 90.2 percent, well above the commonly accepted 80 percent benchmark. As the following series of tables illustrates, the majority of main or secondary characters in the books for transitional readers we analyzed were white.

Table 1 shows that 83.5 percent of books in the sample contained at least one white main or secondary character. By contrast, only 25.8 percent of the books contained at least one person of color as a main or major secondary character. African American children were the people of color most frequently depicted, followed by Asian Americans.

In tables 2 and 3 the data are disaggregated. Table 2 presents the data for the books in which the main and secondary characters represented only one race or ethnicity. As this table shows, there were more books in which the main or secondary characters were identified as "other" (i.e., a nonhuman) than there were books in which the main or secondary characters were African American, Asian American, Hispanic, American Indian, or multiracial. A number of the books that featured people of color were biographies—seven about African Americans and two about American Indians.

Table 3 presents the data for the books that included main and secondary characters from multiple racial and ethnic groups together in the same title. It is important to note that there were *no* books that featured characters from more than one race or ethnicity that *did not* contain a white character. Many of the books that featured multiple races were series books, such as the Bailey School Kids by Debbie Dadey, which depicted school groups.

Racial and Ethnic Representation of the Authors

The authors of the books in the sample were mostly white (see table 4). Authors of color accounted for only twelve (2.2 percent) of the titles. All of the authors of color, with the exception of one, wrote books that featured children from the same ethnic or racial group as themselves. It is important to note that none of the biographies about African Americans or American Indians were written by people of color.

Discussion

Before beginning the discussion, it is important to note that our purpose is not to criticize or condemn Fountas and Pinnell in our analysis. In fact, in their writing they argue that collections of books should reflect the multicultural world in which we live (Fountas and Pinnell 2006). It also is not our intention to attribute the low reading scores of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian fourth graders simply to a lack of multicultural literature. The literacy gap is a complex, multifaceted issue. There are a number of factors that contribute to the poor performance of these children, including the fact that they are more likely to attend segregated schools than whites or Asian Americans (Orfield 2001); to receive a disproportionate amount of poor teaching, including teachers with less experience, fewer advanced degrees, and higher rates of absenteeism (Farkas 2003; Haycock, Jerald, and Huang 2001; Mickelson 2001); or to be tracked even when they attend more racially and ethnically diverse schools (Mickelson 2001). Our aim is to

demonstrate the lack of multicultural literature to support transitional readers and to consider how this omission might affect the ability of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian children to develop into proficient readers.

Critical race theory scholars define racism as “a system of privileges that works to the advantages of whites and to the detriment of people of color” (McNair 2008c, 26). Examples of white privilege include overrepresentation in advanced-placement English classes, not being routinely followed while shopping, and not being asked to speak for all whites (McIntosh 1989; McNair 2008c).

From our analysis, we believe white privilege is apparent in the publication of transitional books. Our findings show that white children can easily find books that feature characters that look like them, assuring that as they transition from easy readers to chapter books they see themselves over and over in the books they read. According to the literacy research, by frequently encountering characters who look like them, these children can make more text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections, thus increasing the likelihood that they will see reading as pleasurable, be motivated to read, develop a love of reading, and become proficient readers (Gangi 2008). Additionally, these children receive the message from books that their lives are important and, according to CRT scholars, the message that to be white is better.

Children of color, on the other hand, find it almost impossible to locate transitional books that show their faces or cultures, especially if they are Native Alaskan, American Indian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or biracial. This lack of transitional books featuring children of color denies these children an important resource for developing into proficient readers. As Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd argue (2001), if children of color are continually presented “with texts in which the main characters are predominantly animals and white people, it stands to reason that these children may begin to wonder whether they, their families, and their communities fit into the world of reading” (811). Consequently, their reading motivation and achievement may suffer. And, just like white children, children of color, too, get a message from transitional books: Because their lives and their stories are not important, it is better to be white.

The fact that all of the books that featured characters from multiple racial or ethnic groups also included white characters can be considered another subtle manifestation of racism. There were no books that featured, for example, only African American and Hispanic children together or only Asian American and African American children together. Each time more than one race or ethnicity was depicted in a book, there also were white characters. While it might be argued that this accurately reflects the U.S. population, it also can be argued that this normalizes whiteness. It sends a subtle message that people of color play supporting roles in American society, a stereotype that the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1979) warned about in their brochure *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism*.

Another common practice was to depict people of color and whites together without differentiating between them. Often the only difference was the color of their skin, and

this difference was only evident on the cover of the books because most of the illustrations inside the books were black-and-white line drawings. For example, in the most current reissue of *Camp Ghost Away* (Delton 1988), one of the books in the Pee Wee Scouts series, the cover depicts an African American child (Lisa) and a white child (Molly). Lisa is depicted as taking part in the same activities in the same settings as the other children—nothing is different about her except the color of her skin (or style of her hair, in the case of the black and white drawings). The children are, for all intents and purposes, interchangeable. Bell and Clark (1998) observed a similar practice in school textbooks, noting that racial imagery was diversified without a similar change in the content of the textbooks. When publishers engage in this practice in an attempt to meet increased demands for multicultural literature, they imply that race and ethnicity are little more than a matter of skin color or facial features. As Bell and Clark point out, not only is this untrue, but as their research suggests, the cultural sensitivity of the verbal content itself is as critical or may be even more critical than racial imagery in efficient recall and comprehension.

Another important tenet of critical race theory, as discussed above, is counterstorytelling. The majority of the books in the sample, including the majority of the books that featured people of color, were written by whites, effectively excluding the voices and viewpoints of people of color. The biographies, which it seems should provide a natural opportunity for counterstorytelling, were particularly problematic. *All* of the biographies of people of color in the sample were written by white authors, thus sending a subtle message to children that people of color are unable, perhaps even unqualified, to tell their own stories. As McNair (2008b) points out, "It cannot be argued that there are not enough authors and illustrators of color who write children's books. This is simply not true" (198). As proof, she provides a list of successful authors and illustrators of color, thus demonstrating that it would be possible for publishing houses to produce more transitional books written by authors of color if they made the decision to do so.

There were a few books in the sample that could be interpreted as counterstories. Among those were *Solo Girl* by Andrea Pinkney (1997), *Elaine and the Flying Frog* by Heidi Chang (1998), and *Ice Dove and Other Stories* by Diane de Anda (1997). These books, all written by authors of color, include storylines, language, and illustrations that present accurate and positive images of children of color. In *Solo Girl*, for example, African American third grader Cass and her twin brothers have moved to a new neighborhood to live with their foster mother. Their urban neighborhood is depicted as a closely knit community in which neighbors look out for one another, and Cass is characterized as smart, energetic, and sensitive. *Ice Dove and Other Stories* includes four upbeat stories in which Hispanic children find strength in loving extended families.Similarly, in *Elaine and the Flying Frog*, references to Asian American culture, in this case Chinese American, are authentic and well integrated into the story, adding both depth and realism.

Interest convergence, a final tenet of CRT, also appears to be at play here. According to this theory, publishers would be willing to publish transitional books that featured characters of color if the companies believed they would benefit financially. As McNair (2008c) explains, in this scenario "the intellectual interests of people of color and the

economic interests of whites would converge" (28). Unfortunately, despite evidence to the contrary, a common stereotype persists that people of color do not buy books (Monjo 2002; McNair 2008b). According to the Book Industry Study Group (2001), in the year 2000, African Americans spent approximately $365 million in total book expenditures. A study conducted by the Selig Center for Economic Growth found that Asian American consumers spend dramatically more than the average U.S. household on education, which includes books (Humphreys 2008). McNair (2008b) notes that *In My Family/En Mi Familia*, a recipient of the Pura Belpré Award, has sold more than 300,000 copies. These figures indicate that if transitional books that featured people of color were published and appropriately marketed, it is likely that the publishing industry would find the endeavor to be financially rewarding.

Conclusions

Critical race theorists argue for placing race at the center of educational research, thereby "making race visible" (McNair 2008c, 200). Our analysis reveals that people of color are underrepresented as characters in transitional books, thus suggesting that racism in its most subtle form is present. It is important to note that we are not suggesting that this racism is deliberate, or even conscious. What we are suggesting is that it is present and that it may be one of the factors contributing to the low reading scores of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian children. As Gangi (2008) argues, "Lack of equity in representation places an unbearable burden on children of color" and jeopardizes their motivation and achievement in reading (34). At a time when children are expected to be making progress toward becoming self-regulating, independent readers, it appears that children of color are denied the very resources that might not only motivate them to read but also allow them to make text-to-self connections—a critical part of becoming proficient readers.

Equally apparent is the lack of authors of color writing transitional books. According to the most recent data collected by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 7.2 percent of the children's books published in 2008 were by creators (authors or illustrators) of color, compared to only 2.2 percent of the transition novels in our sample. A key function of literacy instruction is providing mentors for children through author and illustrator studies (McNair 2008c). As McNair argues, if we want children of color—especially African American and Hispanic males—to aspire to careers beyond professional sports or music, then we need to provide them with role models, a function that writers from their own backgrounds can play (Ibid.).

Social justice is a key goal of CRT. In *Empowering Learners* (2009), school librarians are directed to be active leaders, to be change agents, and to use research to inform practice. They are instructed to promote "reading as a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment" (AASL 2009, 19). We suggest these strategies that school librarians can employ to promote equity in literacy instruction for children of color:

- Actively seek transitional books that feature children of color to add to the library collection and to recommend to teachers and parents. Such books are available from small, independent presses that not only focus on issues of multiculturalism and diversity but are often owned and operated by people of color. The CCBC provides an up-to-date list of African American, American Indian, Asian American, and Hispanic presses. Even the mainstream publishers have some titles available, albeit not enough. For example, Scholastic's Ruby and the Booker Boys series by Derrick Barnes and the new Sassy series by Sharon Draper, as well as some of Hyperion's Jump at the Sun Imprint's Tales of Willimena/Willimena Rules series by Valerie Wilson Wesley fit into the transitional book category.
- When you find quality titles, contact Fountas and Pinnell and suggest that the books be added to their database. The database is updated monthly, and they actively seek recommendations for new titles from publishers. Many of the titles on the current list are reissues of popular old favorites written prior to the recognition of the importance of multicultural literature to the reading lives of children of color.
- Write grants to purchase transitional titles for the school library collection that feature children of color. As we stated in the introduction to this article, closing the literacy achievement gap is a focus of national discourse. Grant funding is available for literacy-related programs from both not-for-profit organizations and government agencies.
- Use your professional credibility and financial capital to challenge the large mainstream publishers to provide more transitional books that feature children of color. There are more than 99,000 school libraries in the United States (ALA 2009). In 2007–8 school libraries spent an average of $9,731 on books (Farmer and Shontz 2009, 463). As Horning and her colleagues (2009) note, there are many editors who understand the need for more literature that represents our diverse society, but "their passion for publishing multicultural literature cannot always carry the day in meetings with bottom-line number crunchers wanting to know whether such books will sell." Create a fact sheet that presents the research that shows the need for these books, with an emphasis on the potential impact they can have on the reading abilities and attitudes of children of color. When you visit the vendor exhibits at national and state conferences, talk to the publisher representatives and distribute your fact sheet. In addition, encourage teachers, parents, and students to write letters to the publishers not only requesting that more transitional titles that feature children of color—particularly titles by authors of color—be made available, but indicating that if these books were available they would purchase them.
- Write to authors of color to request that they consider writing transitional novels. Refer to the research that suggests the potential impact these books can have on the reading success and motivation of children of color as well as the need for more authors and illustrators to serve as role models at this critical transition period in the reading lives of children of color.
- Explore the professional literature on developing multicultural library and classroom collections. Many articles or books have been written that suggest

selection resources and strategies for promoting the use of multicultural materials by teachers, students, and parents.

- Provide professional development for your faculty and administration. Use the research presented in this paper to facilitate a conversation about the role multicultural literature plays in reading motivation and achievement for children of color, especially for children who are making the transition from easy readers to chapter books.
- Booktalk, display, and read aloud transitional books that feature children of color, especially those written by authors of color. Studies suggest that children of color must be exposed to images of academic achievement in their early years, especially if we want them to not view school achievement as something for whites only (Solórzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera 2005; Tatum 1997). Highlighting books that are written by authors of color provides role models for children of color and sends a message that intellectual achievement is for everyone.
- Finally, engage in action research. Document what happens to the literacy behaviors of children of color in your school when culturally relevant reading materials are used for instruction and are made available to support recreational reading.

By helping ensure that children of color see reflections of themselves in the books they read, school librarians will continue to play a leadership role in the ongoing fight for equity and equality in literacy education. And perhaps more importantly, they will be communicating to children of color that they are valued—that they have power.

Works Cited

Alemán, E. 2007. Situating Texas school finance policy in a CRT framework: How "substantially equal" yields racial inequity. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 43(5): 525–58.

American Library Association (ALA). 2009. *Number of libraries in the United States: ALA library fact sheet 1*. www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/library/libraryfactsheet/alalibraryfactsheet1.cfm (accessed Oct. 30, 2009).

American Association of School Librarians (AASL). 2009. *Empowering learners: Guidelines for school library media programs*. Chicago: ALA.

Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2007. *Kids Count data snapshot: One out of five U.S. children living in an immigrant family*. www.kidscount.org/datacenter/databook.jsp (accessed Sept. 15, 2009).

Bell, D. A. 1992. *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.

Bell, Y. R., and T. R. Clark. 1998. Culturally relevant reading material as related to comprehension and recall in African American children. *Journal of Black Psychology* 24(4): 455–75.

Bishop, R. S. 1997. Selecting literature for a multicultural curriculum. In V. J. Harris, ed., *Using multiethnic literature in grades K–8,* 1–19. Norwood, Mass.: Christopher Gordon.

Book Industry Study Group. 2001. *The African-American book buyers study.* Chicago: R.R. Donnelly.

Brooks, W. 2009. An author as a counter-storyteller: Applying critical race theory to a Coretta Scott King Award Book. *Children's Literature in Education* 40(1): 33–45.

Chapman, T. K. 2007. Interrogating classroom relationships and events: Using portraiture and critical race theory in education research. *Educational Researcher* 36(3): 156–62.

Cianciolo, P. 1989. No small challenge: Literature for the transitional readers. *Language Arts* 66(1): 72–81.

Cohn, D., and T. Bahrampour. 2006. Of U.S. Children under 5, nearly half are minorities. *Washington Post*, May 10: A01.

Conrad, N. K., Y. Gong, L. Sipp, and L. Wright. 2004. Using text talk as a gateway to culturally responsive teaching. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 31(3): 187–92.

Council on Interracial Books for Children. 1979. 10 quick ways to analyze children's books for racism and sexism. In *Guidelines for selecting bias-free textbooks and storybooks.* New York: Council on Interracial Books for Children.

DeCuir, J. T., and A. D. Dixson. 2004. "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher* 33(5): 26–31.

Delgado, R., and J. Stefancic. 2001. *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Pr.

DeLeón, L. 2002. Multicultural literature: Reading to develop self-worth. *Multicultural Education* 10(2): 49–51.

Dixson, A. D. 2006. The fire this time: Jazz, research and critical race theory. In A. D. Dixson and C. K. Rousseau, eds., *Critical race theory in education*, 213–30. New York: Routledge.

Eccles, J., and A. Wigfield. 1995. Teacher expectations and student motivation. In J. B. Dusek, ed., *Teacher expectancies,* 185–226. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Farmer, L., and M. Shontz. 2009. Expenditures for resources in school library media centers, 2007–2008. In D. Bogart, ed., *Library and book trade annual*, 54th ed. (pp. 461-472). Medford, N.J.: Information Today.

Ferdman, B. 1990. Literacy and cultural identity. *Harvard Education Review* 60(10): 179–204.

Flake, S. G. 2007. Who says black boys won't read? *Journal of Children's Literature* 34(1): 13–14.

Fountas, I. C., and G. S. Pinnell. 2006. *Leveled books (K–8): Matching texts to readers for effective teaching*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

Farkas, G. 2003. Racial disparities and discrimination in education: What do we know, how do we know it, and what do we need to know? *Teachers College Record* 105:1119-1146.

Franzak, J. 2003. Hopelessness and healing: Racial identity in young adult literature. *The New Advocate* 16(1): 43–56.

Gangi, J. M. 2008. The unbearable whiteness of literacy instruction: Realizing the implications of the proficient reader research. *Multicultural Review* 17(1): 30–35.

Guthrie, J. T., and S. Alao. 1997. Designing contexts to increase motivations for reading. *Educational Psychologist* 32(2): 95–105.

Harris, C. I. 1995. Whiteness as property. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, and K. Thomas, eds., *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*, 357–83. New York: The New Press.

Haycock, K., C. Jerald, and S. Huang. 2001. Closing the gap: Done in a decade. *The race gap in high school*, 293. http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/19/60/11.pdf (accessed Jan. 24, 2010).

Heflin, B. R., and M. A. Barksdale-Ladd. 2001. African American children's literature that helps students find themselves: Selection guidelines for grades K–3. *Reading Teacher* 54(8): 810–19.

Holsti, O. R. 1969. *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Horning, K., M. V. Lindgren, T. Michaelson, and M. Schliesman. 2009. *Thoughts on publishing in 2008.* Madison, Wisc.: Cooperative Children's Book Center. www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/choiceintro09.asp (accessed Jan. 21, 2010).

Humphreys, J. M. 2008. *The multicultural economy*. Athens, Ga.: Selig Center for Economic Growth.

Jose, P. F., and W. F. Brewer. 1984. Development of story liking: Character identification, suspense, and outcome resolution. *Developmental Psychology 20*(5): 911–24.

Ladson-Billings, G. 1998. Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11(1): 7–24.

Ladson-Billings, G., and W. Tate. 1995. Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record* 95(1): 47–68.

Lempke, S. D. 2008. Bridging the reading gap with early chapter books. *Reading Today* 34(1): 34.

Matsuda, M. 1995. Looking to the bottom: Critical legal studies and reparations. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, and K. Thomas, eds., *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement,* 63–70. New York: The New Press.

McCollin, M., and D. O'Shea. 2005. Increasing reading achievement of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. *Preventing School Failure* 50(1): 41–44.

McCullough, R. G. 2008. Untapped cultural support: The influence of culturally bound prior knowledge on comprehension performance. *Reading Horizons* 49(1): 1–30.

McIntosh, P. 1989. White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. In E. Lee, D. Menkart, and M. Okazaway-Rey, eds., *Beyond heroes and holidays: A practical guide to K–12 anti-racist multicultural education and staff development,* 79–82. Washington, D.C.: Network of Educators on the Americas.

McKenna, M., D. Kear, and R. Ellsworth. 1995. Children's attitudes toward reading: A national survey. *Reading Research Quarterly* 30(4): 934–56.

McNair, J. C. 2008a. A comparative analysis of *The Brownies' Book* and contemporary African American children's literature written by Patricia C. McKissack. In W. Brooks and J. McNair, eds., *Embracing, evaluating and examining African American children's literature,* 3–29. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow.

———. 2008b. The representation of authors and illustrators of color in school-based book clubs. *Language Arts* 65(3): 193–201.

———. 2008c. Innocent though they may seem . . . A critical race theory analysis of Firefly and Seesaw Scholastic book club order forms. *Multicultural Review* 17(1): 24–29.

Mickelson, R. A. 2001. Subverting Swann: First-and second-generation segregation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. *American Educational Research Journal* 38(1): 215–52.

Monjo, J. A. 2002. Board books featuring African Americans: Vanishing but not entirely gone. *Michigan Reading Journal* 35(1): 28–34.

National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). 2007. Percentages at or above each achievement level for reading, grade 4, by year, jurisdiction, and race or ethnicity (from school records) [SDRACE]: 1992, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2007. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007496 (accessed June 12, 2009).

Oldfather, P., and A. Wigfield. 1997. Children's motivation for literacy learning. In L. Baker, P. Afflerbach and D. Reinking, eds., *Developing engaged readers in school and home communities*, 889–914. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Orfield, G. 2001. Schools more separate: Consequences of a decade of resegregation. http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/separate_schools01.php (accessed Jan. 24, 2010).

Passel, J., and D. Cohn. 2008. *U.S. population projections: 2005–2050.* Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/85.pdf (Oct. 1, 2009).

Purves, A., and R. Beach. 1972. *Literature and the reader.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.

Reynolds, R. E., M. A. Taylor, M. S. Steffensen, L. L. Shirey, and R. C. Anderson. 1982. Cultural schemata and reading comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly* 17(3): 353–66.

Scholastic. 2008. *The 2008 kids and family reading report*. www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/news/kfrr08web.pdf (accessed Oct. 15, 2009).

School Data Direct. 2008. *United States public schools and districts*. www.schooldatadirect.org/app/data/q/stid=1036196/llid=16stllid=676/locid=1036195/catid=1015/secid=4570/compid=-1/site=pes (accessed Oct. 27, 2009).

Solórzano, D. G., O. Villalpando, and L. Oseguera. 2005. Educational inequities and Latina/o undergraduate students in the United States: A critical race analysis of their educational progress. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 4(3): 272–94.

Something about the author. Detroit, Mich: Gale Research.

Szymusiak, K., F. Sibberson, and L. Koch. 2008. *Beyond leveled books*: *Supporting early and transitional readers in grades K–5,* 2nd ed. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse.

Taberski, S. 2000. *On solid ground: Strategies for teaching reading K–3*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

Tate, W. 1997. Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education* 22: 195–247.

Tatum, B. D. 1997. *"Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" And other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.

Children's Books Cited

Barnes, D. 2008. Ruby and the booker boys series. New York: Scholastic.

Chang, H. 1998. *Elaine and the flying frog.* New York: Scholastic.

de Anda, D. 1997. *Ice dove and other stories*. Houston: Arte Publico.

Delton, J. *Camp ghost-away*. 1988. New York: Random House.

Draper, Sharon. 2009. Sassy series. New York: Scholastic.

Draper, S. M. 1994. *Tears of a tiger.* New York: Aladdin.

Fleishman, P. 1998. *Whirligig*. New York: Books for Young Readers.

Pinkney, A. 1997. *Solo girl*. New York: Hyperion.

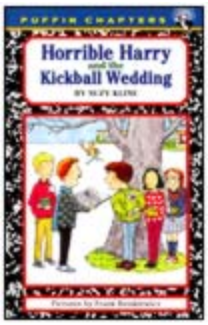
Taylor, M. 2001. *The land.* New York: Dial.

Wesley, V. W. 2003. Tales of Willemina/Willemina rules series. New York: Hyperion.

American Library Association — *50 E. Huron, Chicago IL 60611 | 1.800.545.2433*

2010 © American Library Association

Figure 1. Coding Example



Series, Volume: Horrible Harry and Song Lee
Summary: As Valentine's Day approaches, the students in 2B are preoccupied with kickball and a possible wedding between Horrible Harry and Song Lee.

Title	Author	White	Afr. Amer.	Hisp.	Amer. Ind.	Asian Amer.	Other	Unknown	Multi-racial
Horrible Harry and the Kickball Wedding	Kline, Suzy		0	0	0		0	0	0

In this example, the main and secondary characters were determined to be white (Harry) and Asian American (Song Lee).

Table 1. Race of Main or Secondary Characters for Sample as a Whole

Race or Ethnicity of Main or Major Secondary Characters	Number of Main or Major Secondary Characters*	Percentage of Books* N = 556
White	464	83.5
African American	94	16.9
Other	73	13.1
Asian American	34	6.3
Hispanic	7	1.2

Multiracial	4	0.72
American Indian/ Alaska Native	4	0.72
Unknown	1	0.18

*Total does not equal 556 or 100 percent because a number of the books contained main or secondary characters of more than one race or ethnicity.

Table 2. Books in Which the Main or Secondary Characters Were All of One Race or Ethnicity

Race or Ethnicity of Main or Major Secondary Characters	Number of Books N = 436	Percentage of Books N = 436
White only	347	79.6
Other only	58	13.3
African American only	15	3.4
Hispanic only	4	.92
Asian American only	4	.92
American Indian only	4	.92
Multiracial	4	.92

*Total does not equal 100 percent because of rounding.

Table 3. Books That Featured People from Multiple Racial/Ethnic Groups

Racial/Ethnic Groups	Number of Books N = 109	Percentage of Books N = 109
White and African American	73	67.0
White and Asian American	28	25.7
White, African American, and Asian American	4	3.7

White and Hispanic	2	1.8
White, African American, and Hispanic	1	0.9
White, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic	1	0.9
White and American Indian	0	0
White and Multiracial	0	0

Table 4. Race of Authors

Race or Ethnicity of Author	**Number N = 151**	**Percentage N = 151**
White	115	76.2
African American	7	4.6
Hispanic	1	0.7
Asian American	3	1.9
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	0
Unknown	25	16.6

American Library Association — *50 E. Huron, Chicago IL 60611 | 1.800.545.2433*

2010 © American Library Association